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BEDROCK IN RELIGION

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When a pastor looks for a basis of religious faith, his interest is not academic, but practical. He is out to help his parishioners to a real living faith. It is this which gives interest to the present article. It is the result of the thinking engendered by actual pastoral experience.

Religion, like education and social science, must be grounded finally in the facts of experimental psychology. The voucher of certainty, the ground of authority, and the first principles of organization for the whole body of Christian doctrine lie in the normal reactions of the soul. That the principle here proposed is true is indicated by the mind's own functioning, by the nature of religion, by the method of Jesus, by the genetic process of the Bible, by the appeal of the hortatory evangelists, by the common implication of the contending schools of traditional theology, and by the evidential and constructive value of the principle itself.

A normal act of the human mind is a first fact in human knowledge. It is the only means by which existence of any kind can express itself in the field of human consciousness. The soul shows, by what it does, what the universe is. Its constitution reflects the constitution of the scheme of being in, through, and from which it emerges. The self-affirmation of consciousness can never be superseded in authority and certainty by any argument about objective being or by considerations based upon any external fact. The

"I am" of the human personality is the only avenue through which the "I Am" of the Infinite can become an actual revelation to that personality. Those religious indexes which lie in the mind's own normal action are the initial and final revelation of God to human consciousness. In the nature of the case the Bible, the reason, and the church, so far as they are agencies of revelation at all, are simply tools for teaching.

The religious movement of the mind, no matter what various factors and phases may enter into it, has at least one constant and fundamental element, namely, a longing for the best life, around which all of the religious reactions cluster and from which they derive their value. This longing is the generic and genetic religious act; and, however religion may be otherwise properly defined, it is always essentially the pursuit of the best life, and it is properly and with scientific exactness so defined. Whenever this longing attains its utmost depth and dominating power in the soul, it spontaneously expands into the longings for self-perfection and self-perpetuation and for the best life for all of the human race. It turns naturally into universal

love and is ready to worship and to serve a God made in its own image. In its larger development, therefore, religion is a passionately loving self-devotion to the best life for all.

Faith is the credit which we naturally give to all of the psychic reactions which seem to us to be normal — that is, organically true to the longing for the best life. It is integral in all conscious vital impulses and in all instinctive tendencies of the human race. Wishes are the wings of faith; and the wish is, indeed and rightly, father to the thought. Specifically we learn by experience that circumstances modify the usefulness and rightfulness of various acts to which we are inwardly impelled; and so we learn to select and to choose among wished but conflicting courses of action. The longing for the best life is the standard by which we justify our choices to ourselves. Faith refuses to credit morally any choice not so justified. We blame ourselves morally when we are conscious that we chose contrary to what we knew to be in harmony with the best life. We cannot believe in such choices. Faith not only affirms the validity of the longing for the best life in its primary form of self-concern, but it equally validates religion in its larger and social concern for all humanity. I think that the whole experience of the human race may challenge a single case of a person in whom the longing for the best life was healthy and dominant as a motive, and who was at the same time faithless, selfish, satisfied with imperfect and temporary living, without an instinctive tendency to universal kindness, unconcerned about the welfare of others, in doubt

about the worth of the life so longed for or disinclined to attempt its achievement. All forms of faith, so far as they are genuine, are grounded in this original and vital faith in the best life and grow out of it; and this faith in the validity of the soul's own reactions is of the essence of true religion and is ineradicable from the mind of the human race. It is the soul's own testimony to its own religious competency, and its own definition of religion in terms, not of speech, but of its own psychic reaction.

I

In harmony with this view the method of Jesus exhibits a striking absence of metaphysical argument and of appeal to historical or institutional authority. While he employed sound reasoning, recognized the connection of his work with the religious past, honored the sacred records of his people, and followed respectfully the institutional forms of his nation, he nowhere admitted that the validity of his teaching depended upon any of these things. His basic appeal was directed to the instinctive reactions of the soul, to the simple responses of the child mind, to the common sense of the common people, to the primary longing for the best life, and to the primary and vital faith in that life, with all of the implications of such an appeal.

The character of the Bible and the process by which it came into being are also significant of the principle herein advanced. From the beginning to the end of the book there is no argument to prove the existence of

God, nor any effort to show that the book as such is of divine authority. On the contrary, every writer who had part in the making of it during the long centuries while it was growing into a finished expression of the religious experience of a great historic people seems to have thought that the message itself was so worthful as to need no other enforcement than its obvious worth. Questions of canonicity, inspiration, and formal authority are not argued in the Bible itself. They are afterthoughts of theology. Its constant assumption is that no person of common sense who is honestly seeking the best life can fail to hear the call of God in the message it bears. It regards itself as its own all-sufficient appeal to moral and religious common sense. It carries the air of one consciously revealing the self-evident. It trusts the primary functions of the soul.

A remarkable, unintentional, and quite naive confirmation of the view here presented is found in a study of the method of the hortatory evangelists. A common characteristic of their class is a fondness for proclaiming their stalwart adherence to traditional creeds. "The old religion is good enough" for them. They vaunt themselves as the special conservators of orthodoxy, the hangmen of the higher critics, and the detectives of heresy among the pastors. They announce the existence of a great religious controversy in which they stand as the champions of the truth against an apostate ministry. If such a conflict exists, then the task of the evangelist is one that calls for careful, exact, ample, scientific, and logical argument, drawn from a wide range

of historical and philosophical material and so presented as to carry to the people a rational, certain, satisfying, and saving objective knowledge of truth of the things asserted by him. Does he present such an argument? Not he. It would be too dry. It would kill the meetings. He is not sufficiently master of either the matter or the method of such an argument. What then? Our Don Quixote of orthodoxy drops the argument at the point where it is most vital, fixes his hortatory lance in rest, and rides to the charge in the name of "heartfelt religion." That is, he appeals to the religious instinct, to the reactions of child psychology, to the simple and direct perceptions and impulses of the best life which lie in the field of common sense. The creedal argument is lost in the spiritual appeal and is never recovered. By this appeal people are truly saved, most of whom never in all their lives find out whether the form of doctrine which he preached is true or not. They are saved through the awakening of their passionate longing for the best life and through the group of reactions that accompany such a longing. His own method of appeal exposes the shallowness of his theological bravado and is a demonstration, by a resistless argument *ad hominem*, of the principle that religion is fundamentally a matter of psychology rather than of history, form, or dogma; not logic, but life; not grammar, but grace.

This principle is further evinced by the fact that it supplies the ground of authority in common for the contending schools of theology and the ultimate terms of mediation among them. Every dispute among them refers itself back

to the question: How do you know? But this is simply another form of the question: How does the mind naturally act? It is a question of psychology. Consequently for their ultimate premises they refer their dispute back to the constitution of the human mind and find therein their common ground of authority. Much of their contention is due to a failure on their part to accept frankly the testimony of their own common experience. If they would do so, they would find therein a large common ground of theology, would restrain a tendency to dogmatism, would become more tolerant toward variations in definition, and would be able to consider each other's faith sympathetically without the fear of being damned for the sins of reasonableness and good-will. The neglected premise of psychic experience is the real principle of mediation in their disputes. Before the light which lightens every man, if they will only take pains to let it shine in common both in their hearts and upon the topics of their controversies, they will find their sectarian slogans becoming far less potent as rallying-cries; their disagreements and antipathies will seem less vital; they will acquire magnanimity and tolerance and will be far on the way toward general agreement. When we build our creed upon the soul as we now build our curriculum upon it, the religious fellowship of the churches will become as free as academic fellowship has come to be.

II

What is the constructive value of a truly scientific psychology for the

purpose of forming a system of Christian doctrine and evidences? When we begin to organize our creed upon the vital impulse as it exhibits itself in the forms of a longing for the best life, of faith in that life, and of a final self-determination toward that life, does the resultant projection of doctrine exhibit a larger measure of richness, certainty, freedom, and sanctity than do creeds built upon the assumptions of traditional revelation, of philosophical theory, or of ecclesiastical authority? Test it upon a few of the vital points of religious doctrine, and thus ascertain by experiment how it works as a basis of doctrinal statement and evidence.

For instance, the Goal of being toward which the longing for the best life impels us, the What-We-Want-to-Be, the eternal and perfect Self, is God. So far as the best life becomes a reality in our experience, so does God. Whenever the spirit of the best life awakens in us in the form of longings for perfect and everlasting selfhood and for universal welfare, we have found God within ourselves, indwelling, unnamed, unobjectified, undefined, but simply sensed as the Spirit of life. But in practice these longings cannot be separated from the world of ideas; and, when we begin to idealize, objectify, and name that Being which in vital terms we sense as the best life, a great variety of ideas and names may play hide-and-seek in the mind: God, Gott, Deus, Dieu, Yahweh, Jove, the Almighty, I Am, the Holy Spirit, Manitou, the Heart of the World, the Eternal Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, Love, the Social Spirit, King, Father, Mother, Brother, Comrade, Friend;

and so on indefinitely we may go, naming and defining the infinitely undefinable, inexplicable, and inevitable Gracious Presence, realized in the midst of the quest for the best life. If heart and thought be true to the best life, let speech be free to name and describe the mind's corresponding ideas of God. Syncretism is no sin. All terms which express a genuine faith in the best life are valid. Creeds and forms of worship born in that faith can hardly miss the divine reality, because the soul has already embraced, in the sources of motive and the determinants of character, that life whose only possible meaning in the world of ideas is God.

Again, who is Christ? He is the best human being we can think of, who gives to us the most perfect exhibition of the best life, the strongest stimulus to the longing for it, and the greatest help toward its achievement. There is room for all of the metaphysics and stories of miracles that may be spun about him. But they are incidental, while he is our vital concern. Is he divine? What do we mean by this phrase? Why should we care? And why should he not be to us very God? If he makes me Christly, he is Christ. If he makes me godly, he is God. Whatever else the world's Christ may be, in his contact with the soul he is the Spirit of the best life, universal Love incarnate in man, Good-Will serving and saving to the uttermost. All out of doors belongs to him. He cannot be fenced in with creedal definitions; and the soul in whom his spirit is regnant may ask, think, speak, and express its consciousness of him with unfettered spontaneity. But is the historic Jesus

of Nazareth the Christ? Ask your soul rather than your priest. What appeal does he make to your sense of the best life? It is a fact of human experience that the story of Jesus awakens actual saving reactions in the soul. His very name comes to be a hitching-point for vital faith. Believing in him produces Christian character. But are there not other saviors; and does not believing in them also make people Christly? Try them and see. If they work as Jesus does, then he has associates, but no rivals. All who love, serve, and save are his fellows. The more perfectly they can effect the salvation of men, the less rivalry can there be between them and him. He is trying to fill the world with people as much like himself as possible. Go to the search. If anybody can be found who surpasses him in spiritual genuineness and power, then in his name I am ready to pledge both myself and Jesus to follow that surpassing Christ. But to me, and as I know him, he is supreme, unique, and final.

Consider likewise the Bible. If we come to it with the instinct of the best life rather than with a theological syllabus, we shall find it shot through with the spirit of Christ. Did inspired men produce it? Who knows? And what, indeed, does the question mean? Is the Bible idyllic, mythical, legendary, historical, poetical, enigmatic, didactic, romantic, scientific? Does it contain errors? Is there any other inspired literature in the world? For answers, read and see. Paul's test is pragmatic and final. All literature inspired of God is profitable for the culture of the best life; and, conversely, all

literature so profitable is inspired of God. The vital question concerning the Bible is: What kind of people does it produce? Does it inspire a longing for the best life? Does it tend to create Christly character? If so, we may care little for questions of criticism; and if not, we may care even less. In common experience the Bible, when read in the spirit of sincere hospitality to the truth, does, indeed, show Christ to men and is accompanied by a saving reaction in their lives. This being true, how can we greatly care what theories men hold of its origin and interpretation? Its divine authority is measured precisely by its power to produce saving results.

The very core of the Kingdom of God, of a valid church, and of all valid social order is the collective pursuit of the best life for all. Society is collective psychology. From this point of view the church is easily defined as a group of Christians joined together in the spirit of Christ, by a Christ-motivated, individual choice, to carry on his work; and the Kingdom of God is that universal community of mankind which the church represents and toward which it strives. Thus the church is essentially a free democracy, following the Christ-enlightened common sense of the best life in the people collectively. Its democratic spirit tends to communicate itself from the church to the community as a whole; and the stronger it is in the church, the more will it assert itself in secular relations as a tendency toward political, industrial, and educational democracy. The irenic principle of mediation between the church, on the one hand, and the

Socialist movement, on the other, is their common motive, which is the longing for the best life for all. They are phases of the same religion; and if they come to understand each other, they will join hands in enthusiastic fellowship. The keys of the Kingdom go into the hands of those who have Christ in their hearts.

What of the future life? When we come face to face with eternity, as the event of death brings us to face it, uncertainty and obscurity torture us. Shall we live beyond the grave? Shall we be happy or miserable there, solitary or social? How do I know that what the Bible says upon this subject is true? These questions come. They have a right to come. Until sufficiently answered, they will continue to come and to stretch forth a sinister hand, thrusting hope and peace out of the soul. At such a juncture, when the soul lifts its last desperate cry for something solid upon which to stand while its world dies into night, will you mock the heart hunger of the dying by exhorting them to believe stoutly in a vague Perhaps—to die trusting in what somebody says, because somebody says it, or because it is written in a book? Why not rather flood their night with the sweetest gospel ever revealed to mankind, namely, the gospel of the eternal and imperishable worth of the Christ spirit, written in the value-sense of the soul itself? By every measure of value at its command the soul instinctively validates the life of universal good will as the best life for time and eternity. No matter how that sense of value came to exist, whether by direct and foreseeing

creation or by a process of evolution which acquires significance as it goes, here that sense is, giving imperative sanction to the Christ-motivated life as a finality. No matter in what picturesque or grotesque forms the imagination of men may trick out in detail the future prospects of such a life, here, below all imagery, remains that value-sense, vital, inherent, insistent, enduring, the ever-present and immediate fact and factor of hope. Its existence in human experience is direct and indisputable testimony to the truth of the eternal expectation which accompanies the spirit of Christ in the heart. To deny its certainty is to tear all heart and meaning out of human experience and out of the universe; to throw away all of the moral gains of life as a worthless heap of garbage; and to substitute for that heart and meaning and for those moral gains, as the reward for the best life, a worthless, unfeeling, inexplicable, and universal idiocy. But let the Christly choice of the soul mean in its expectation what it is always trying to mean as a fact in religious experience, and the soul that keeps faith with the best life here can live in unbroken triumph, smile at death, welcome eternity, and never know final disappointment. The tomorrow of the Christ life is as certain as its today is valid; and the same common value-sense which today certifies its validity, by the same act certifies its expectation for tomorrow. Tested by the facts of psychology, the hope of eternal life in Christ has the full quality of scientific knowledge; and the voice of science chants in unison with all the hymns of hope from the

simplest carol to the "Hallelujah Chorus."

III

The doctrinal method indicated in these instances can be carried through the whole range of the creed. When we let the soul tell its own story, taking full account of its instinctive tendency to sense, affirm, believe, choose, and pursue the best life, what a story it tells! It interprets the universe by its own needs. It believes in the trustworthiness of its own vital and psychic reactions. It believes that its hunger points to what is real and good and achievable. Its God is the Goal of its hunger for the best life. Its moral law is universal love. To it, sin is turning away from the best life. Its Christ is the world's Best Friend. To it, salvation is secured by a Christly choice of the best life. For it, the Kingdom of God is a friendly world, a civilization formed by the spirit of Christ in the people. Its gospel is the free and glad message of the best life for all. Its Bible is that literature in which the gospel finds true and effectual expression. It expects, in the pursuit of the best life here, to achieve eternal life, with all of the Christly, in God. It conserves all of the substance and beauty of the historic creeds and of the most rigid orthodoxy of the present age, while at the same time it interprets religion in terms of science and of liberty, and adds a richness and certitude unknown to a crude traditionalism. It makes the old gospel impregnable in the field of philosophy and invincible in the field of science, as it has been hitherto in tradition and sentiment.

A general consequence of this reasoning is to emphasize the high value of the pragmatic test in defining and certifying religious teaching. The power of human speech to express transcendent truth is limited. No man, I suppose, ever made a creed that satisfied its maker. No thoroughgoing thinker ever was satisfied with any creed that anybody ever made. Every time we discover a new aspect of truth, we experience a new apperception; our whole scheme of doctrine, while preserving all of the gains of truth already made, is jostled into a new order of thinking to accommodate the new gain, and a new form of speech is required to express that order of thinking. The revision of creeds is as natural and necessary as the vital functions. Whether we will or no, the application of a scientific psychology to the art of creed-making is inevitable. All doctrinal method must pass the test which is also the basic test of all educational method. Both alike must be grounded in the normal functioning of the human soul, must take full account of the normal religious impulses and tendencies, must work out in the direction of the best life for all and forever, and must tend toward the realization of the most perfect social

ideal here and now. If the complex religious motion of the soul is to be allowed the value of a scientific fact, then precisely here, in the constitution of the human mind itself, is the original, fundamental, certain, and final revelation, out of which grows everything valid in religious faith and life; for the sake of which all religious expression and stimulus exist; to which all religious teaching must come for the final test of its authority; and by which faith in a fatherly God, in a friendly universe, in a Christly spirit, in a brotherly community, and in an endless and perfect life for the individual and for all who will, is certified beyond question. The whole system of religion, when it is based upon the obvious and elementary facts of the human mind, is instinctive, self-evident, simple, saving, social, spiritual, democratic, and Christly. It is the religion of love, the religion of the people, the religion of unspoiled childhood, the religion of common sense. It is the religion of Abraham, of the Hebrew prophets, of Jesus, of the primitive church, and of human sincerity in every age. It is the religion of all true evangelism, of all true science, of all true art, and of all healthy social order. It is the certain, satisfying, and final religion.